<http://scores.espn.go.com/ncb/recap?gameId=330060135>

MINNEAPOLIS -- By the time [Austin Hollins](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=51537) swished his fifth 3-pointer in a span of 3 1/2 minutes, that sluggish start by Minnesota was long forgotten.

The ninth-ranked Gophers smothered Northwestern with their usual relentless defense and ran away with the game once they found their shot.

Hollins scored 17 of his 19 points during Minnesota's big second-half surge and the Gophers won 69-51 on Sunday night, picking up more momentum in their long quest to join the Big Ten's elite under coach Tubby Smith.

"This was a good test for us. There are going to be games like that when we're going to struggle, and fighting through it shows what kind of a team we are," said Hollins, who established his career high in 3-pointers.

Hollins powered a 26-7 run over an 8-minute stretch that gave the Gophers, who had only 17 points in the first half, a 45-25 lead. Minnesota (14-1, 2-0) has won 10 in a row, the program's longest winning streak since it opened the 2008-09 season with 12 straight victories.

"That's the beauty about this team. Any game, somebody can step up big," said [Trevor Mbakwe](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=36628), who had four points, 11 rebounds and four blocks. "We needed that from Austin. Offensively it was a struggle. It was ugly."

[Dave Sobolewski](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=56226) had 10 points, five assists and four steals for the Wildcats (9-6, 0-2), who were outrebounded 47-20, the fewest rebounds by a Gophers opponent all season. [Reggie Hearn](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=48403) returned for Northwestern after missing two games because of a sprained left ankle, finishing with 11 points.

But the Wildcats, missing star [Drew Crawford](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=45984) because of season-ending shoulder surgery, couldn't keep up down the stretch.

"They are a good team. That's why they are top 10 in the nation," Sobolewski said. "They've got a lot of weapons. I think for the first ... 25 minutes we did a great job on defense. Then kind of all hell broke loose."

Hollins hit his first four 3-pointers from almost exactly the same spot on the left wing. Then he moved to the right corner and swished one from there, too, drawing a chant of his name from the impressed crowd.

"I was definitely starting to feel it, and it just kept on falling so if I was open I was going to let it fly," he said. "I was a little shocked how open I was on the fifth one, so I couldn't pass that up."

Northwestern hasn't won at Minnesota since Smith took over for the 2007-08 season.

"They are shot blockers, and that certainly disturbed us," coach Bill Carmody said, adding: "You're going to beat this team here, then when you have an open look you've got to knock them down. We couldn't really do that until it was out of the question."

[Rodney Williams](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=45983) had nine points and five rebounds for the Gophers, who play at No. 11 Illinois and No. 5 Indiana next week. It was the fewest points allowed by Minnesota in a Big Ten game in almost two years, since giving up 45 to Iowa on Feb. 13, 2011.

The Wildcats were stuck with a daunting start to the Big Ten season, with five of their first seven conference games against teams ranked this week in the top 11 of The Associated Press poll, though a lot of teams will face similar stretches this year in this top-heavy league.

In a 94-66 loss to No. 2 Michigan on Thursday, the Wildcats were lured by the Wolverines into an up-and-down, faster pace they can't play. So in this one, Carmody made sure his team stayed with the usual deliberate offensive style that complements the tricky 1-3-1 zone defense.

The strategy worked for a while.

The Gophers helped the Wildcats by missing their first five free throws, ending the slide in the final minute of the first half when Williams swished a pair, prompting a mock cheer from the restless crowd and pushing Minnesota's lead to 17-13.

"When that happens it makes for a long half, but our kids stayed focused, stayed poised," Smith said. "There's going to be games like that."

What gives this Gophers team a true advantage over a lot of opponents is enough defense -- currently the conference leader in blocks and steals -- to endure a shooting slump in an ugly game. The first offensive highlight came with 14:22 remaining when Mbakwe drove into the lane and finished with a tomahawk dunk to bring the fans to their feet and put the Gophers in front 26-18. He set that up, though, by jumping in the lane and using his exceptional reach to swat a short shot by [Alex Olah](http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/player/profile?playerId=61267).

Then Hollins took over. He made two of three foul shots, and Williams cut across the lane to catch the rebound of his miss with one hand and smoothly tip the ball for a banked-in put-back.

"We didn't panic at all. We kept playing our defense, so that's what we hang our hats on, and that's what got us the `W," Williams said.